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Cemented Relations with Ghana

Foundation She Built Was One of Friendship

By Patricia Griffith

POTENTIAL Youth Peace Corps recruits could learn a great deal from Ida Smith's experiences in Africa last summer.

Ida, a senior math major at Howard University, spent two months in Ghana pouring cement, hauling bricks and digging drainage ditches with a team of American students on Operation Crossroads Africa.

It was a hard, hot summer. And for a few of the 180 carefully-selected and trained students who worked in all West African countries, it ended with a sense of frustration and failure.

"That wasn't true of me,

however," said Ida, who earlier this month briefed Cadets at West Point about what she saw and learned in Ghana.

As soon as our team arrived in Accra (she was one of two Negro students on a team of 12) someone came up to me and spoke to me in an African language. I couldn't understand, but I knew then that it would be an exciting summer.

All the students had prepared for the trip by writing papers and reading several books and magazines about the country in which they would work.

Even so, Ida's first impressions were tinged with surprise. "We knew that Africa is in a state of transition from the old to the new," she explained, "but still it was surprising to see the old and the new so

close together . . . a mud hut right next to a very modern building, for instance."

After a week's orientation at the University College of Ghana in Accra, the American students headed for their first project—to help construct a three-room school in Prampram, a village of 500 people 30 miles from Accra.

Also working on the school were 25 students from Ghana, several villagers and a technical advisor sent by the government.

"We were up every morning at 5:30 and had coffee and bread before starting to work," Ida said. "The building was all concrete, and it was our job to dig out the foundation and then make large cement blocks in molds to use for the walls."

About 9 a. m. there was a break for breakfast, usually cooked cereal, bread and fruit.

"We tried to live on an African budget for food, but sometimes we'd go over the budget and eat eggs or something else to supplement our diet.

"Africans eat a lot of soup, stew and tropical vegetables. Rice is a staple. Everything is highly seasoned with pepper . . . I really don't like food that hot, but when that's all there is to eat, you gradually get used to it."

After breakfast it was back to work for another two or three hours until time for a quick "coconut break" when each worker was given a whole coconut for a late morning snack.

Heat and humidity—"every day was like a bad,

bad Washington summer day"—usually forced a halt to construction sometime before 2 p. m.

When work stopped, discussions began. Ida and her team members were pounded with questions by the Ghanaian students regarding life in the United States and American foreign policy.

"We had to set aside a whole evening for segregation," she said. "We tried to explain that the situation is getting better . . . that not all Americans believe in segregation . . . that it's a very complex problem that can't be solved all at once.

"There's at least one article a day in their papers about segregation in the United States," she continued, "and they believe that this is a problem found only in the United States and no place else."

The African students were also highly critical of America's role in the U-2 plane incident, "and often they'd just refuse to listen to us when we warned about Russia and communism. They'd say 'Russia hasn't been a colonial power in Africa' and would refuse to hear anything we said."

Ida and her team left Prampram after two weeks, with the school almost completed except for the windows, doors and roof.

Their second project, in a town on the border of French Togoland, was to dig street drains along with some 20 African students.